

19 October 1979

Memorandum for the Senior Review Panel

Subject: The Role of the SRP in the Post-Bowie Era

Before I become tainted with a knowledge of the workings of the Senior Review Panel, permit me to offer some thoughts as a rank outsider. I would be pleased to discuss any of these points with you at your convenience.



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Some Thoughts on the Senior Review Panel

Observations

There is a need--in my view, a strong need--for the enunciation and enforcement of high standards for national intelligence production.

Such a quality control function can best be maintained if it is ultimately independent of responsibility for the actual production of intelligence.

The standards for judging the quality of intelligence products should derive from the DCI's and consumer's needs, rather than from existing methods of intelligence production.

To enforce standards, a formal critical mechanism should be developed. One does not now exist.

The unique talents of the present members of the Senior Review Panel lie in their broad knowledge of US policy concerns. To involve the Panel in the detailed mechanics of intelligence production would be to dilute the effectiveness of these talents.

Recommendations

The Senior Review Panel should be an independent organizational entity. It should be responsive to the DCI in his role as the government's senior intelligence advisor. If a designated representative of the DCI is the de facto audience of the Panel, regular direct access to the DCI himself should still be assured.

The Panel should not be inserted into the bureaucratic process of production (e.g., it should not be required to approve NIE terms of reference before the process can proceed). It should assume a board of directors' outlook rather than that of line managers.

Under a broad charter for quality control, the Panel should be free to adapt its concerns and methods of operation to the needs of the time. Its greatest impact will come from the quality of its advice, and the areas of advice should be unrestricted.

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To provide a visible identity for the Panel's activities, a periodical devoted to evaluation and criticism of finished intelligence should be considered.

Discussion

With the minor exception of some Congressional review of intelligence performance on specific events, there really is no regular independent evaluation of the quality of finished national intelligence. There is an almost suffocating internal review and coordination process during the production of estimates and other studies, and occasional post-mortems are held after major studies are completed. But these are self-evaluations by the people who are responsible for the studies. There simply is no established mechanism for a comprehensive look at national intelligence by disinterested parties having a unified view of what national intelligence should be.

Even discounting the wide variance in audiences for national intelligence, I think there remains a great disparity among managers of intelligence production--NIOs, CIA Office directors, etc.--about the standards for an acceptable intelligence report. Few would disagree about goals--providing analysis which illuminates policy issues or whatever--but I suspect there would be considerable disagreement about how to tell when we have done that job well.

The Panel's memorandum of 2 October (Theory and Practice of NIEs, SNIEs, and IIMs) does a good job of defining what national intelligence documents are supposed to do, but it doesn't discuss how to measure progress toward or accomplishment of the stated goals. It is in establishing a mechanism for relating accomplishment to goals and enforcing standards that I believe the Panel could have the most beneficial effect.

What sort of standards? I mean really fundamental ones, such as:

--Does the document answer the questions asked?

--Does it address the right policy issues?

--Is it analytically sound?

--Where judgments and projections are involved, is the basis for the judgment clearly presented?

--Are assumptions clearly labeled? Is it clear how the answer would change if the assumptions were wrong?

--Are uncertainties and alternative interpretations adequately accounted for?

It might at first appear that such a resort to first principles is a bit childish for a bunch of grizzled intelligence professionals. I think if you probed the attitudes of various producers, though, you would find a variety of judgments as to the adequacy of individual products in meeting such standards. What I am encouraging is a more uniform control over the application of standards, so that eventually we have a closer agreement on the definition of analysis versus assertion, what constitutes a complete as opposed to a partial answer, explicit assumptions differing from "as any fool knows", etc.

In deriving standards for national intelligence, I think a hard rethinking of service to the consumer is in order. It has always impressed me that intelligence producers tend to be arrogant in protecting the consumer from hard thought. The drive for clarity, succinctness, and simplicity is frequently self-defeating in obscuring subtleties and genuine complexity. In any event, the standards should stress the needs of the consumer over the convenience or prejudices of the producer.

The intelligence trade is unusual among established scholarly disciplines in lacking a regular critical mechanism. I believe it suffers from this lack. There simply is no peer evaluation, no letters to the editors column where a continuing dialogue can serve to extend and sharpen analysis. The new NFAC journal, "Contra", may be a step in that direction, but it has a pretty amorphous shape at the moment.

I think it would be a mistake if the Panel were to become too closely allied with the NIOs or D/NFAC (as distinct from DD/NFA). The DCI has abundant sources of qualified advice about the nitty-gritty of intelligence collection, processing, analysis, and production. He has precious little wisdom available to him on how all of that should be transformed into meeting the needs of the consumer. The Panel members were selected, I presume, for their proven record outside the intelligence community; your skills would be squandered if you were to become overly concerned with the minutia of intelligence management. I encourage you to stand somewhat above the fray.

From that preamble, where would I go? Let me approach it from the standpoint of if I were DCI.

1. I would want a panel which is truly independent of production offices.

2. The panel should concern itself with improving the quality of national intelligence. Its focus, then, would be on the output of the intelligence process, but its authority should extend to looking as far back into the process as it thought necessary to explain deficiencies in the output.

3. I would ask the panel to establish and lead the activities of a formal critical mechanism.